U.S. holds up release of JFK files

Justice Department cites concerns that publicity could threaten security of investigations

EXAMINER NEWS SERVICES

WASHINGTON — Legislation to release Kennedy assassination documents has hit a snag: The Justice Department, reversing Bush administration policy, has come out strongly against the proposal.

Assistant Attorney General W. Lee Rawls said in a letter made public Tuesday that the proposed House-Senate resolution "would severely encroach upon the president's constitutional authority to protect confidential information."

Rawls also raised national security concerns, saying that language clearing the way for the release of CIA and FBI documents could endanger intelligence methods and sources. And he said the bill would leave law enforcement and executive branch deliberations open to public scrutiny.

"We strongly object to the resolution in its current form," Rawls said. If passed, the Justice Department "would give serious consideration to recommending presidential disapproval."

Until Tuesday, top-ranking administration officials — including CIA Director Robert Gates and FBI chief William Sessions — had supported the legislation, saying they would cooperate in making public thousands of secret documents relating to the 1963 slaying of President John F. Kennedy.

Rawls said the Justice Department was "sympathetic to the concerns" of the public about the assassination and was drafting an alternative version. But the department's bill would broaden the president's power to withhold information and increase his control over the review process.

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., scoffed at the idea that opening the files would undermine intelligence operations.

"It's really hard for me to imag- [illegible]

Meanwhile, the [illegible] consumer [illegible] group filed suit Wednesday in U.S. District Court alleging the National Archives has [illegible]

[illegible] the photos since 1966, when the Kennedys turned over the material on condition that it be kept from public view while the late president's immediate family [illegible]

The lawsuit says the photos are government property and shouldn't be subject to the restrictions of a private family.